

through the station, to surround the Assassin on all sides.

The Assassin just hovered there, in midair, a shimmering black spot. As though it were thinking. It must have detected the Godball's absence by now. It had probably also sniffed out the dreaming traces that remained, in the three scientists.

Yp, hearing the door slam, rushed out into the hallway behind me. He stopped and stared at the Assassin, his mouth open.

"It's the same," he said.

"What?" I asked, without turning.

"The shape. It's the same as the Godball. Like its ghost or something."

"Get out of here," I said. "Lock yourself in."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," I hissed. "Out."

He slipped back into his room.

The Assassin sat, frozen in midair. Suit's remote units flew up into the air and whirled around it, trying to draw fire, trying to elicit a response. The Assassin showed none. Suit flew his spine joints into the blackness of the sphere, where they were held, for a moment, out of sight.

When they emerged they seemed slowed.

"What?" I said to Suit, nervously.

Suit flew the remotes back and reformed his spine. He wanted it complete for the confrontation, apparently. I couldn't help wondering if he'd learned something that he wasn't telling me.

Then the Assassin began advancing steadily through the air towards us, as though Suit had agreed to some formal duel. "Shit," I said aloud. "Suit? Where are you?"

Suit didn't make any move that I could detect. If he was readying a defence it didn't involve me. The Assassin drifted forward until it touched Suit at my chest, and then continued, sinking into Suit and disappearing.

"Suit!"

Nothing. Suit's only move was to mop the sweat that trickled down my ribs. I waited to feel some sign of Suit's adjustment, but for all I could tell he was inert.

Had he conquered the Assassin so effortlessly that it didn't require my help?

Apparently. Or else the Assassin hadn't had all that much to begin with. The disappearance of the Godball had robbed it of its purpose.

I staggered backwards a step, still wary, waiting for some kind of shock or backlash, but there wasn't any. Suit retracted my helmet, always a sign of confidence, and otherwise hung on me like a nice-fitting set of clothes, his weapons capacity nil.

Well, okay then. If Suit was relaxed why shouldn't I be?

"What's happening?" cried a voice from behind the door at my left. Spanic.

"Uh, it's over," I said. "Everything's hunky dory."

"You're lying," said Spanic. "It's going to kill me."

The passing of the Assassin didn't necessarily mean calm on Halfgone.

"Uh, no, actually," I said. I was getting tired of Spanic. "It wasn't a big deal. The Godball was right to want to be eaten, I guess. The Assassin seemed pretty lightweight after all that buildup, truth be told."

"It's safe?"

"It's safe."

The door opened and Spanic stuck his head out. I spread my arms to indicate the empty corridor. "You missed it," I said. "Yp said it was a dead ringer for the Godball."

Spanic opened the door. I could see Detbar sitting on the bed behind him, his head still in his hands. Probably still trying to work out the reason he'd dreamed me into existence. Spanic stepped out and examined the corridor.

My hand jerked up against my will. Suit. He flowed down around my wrist, before I had time to think, and formed a simple handheld laser. I felt the trigger twitch under my finger, without my help. The middle of Spanic's body was fried into a bloody, burning mass, his hands waving momentarily in the air, his eyes wide. Then he folded into a heap on the floor.

The Assassin had overridden Suit.

W e strode forward, against my efforts, into the room where Detbar now huddled, terrified, in the furthest corner. He'd left his glasses on the bed, and he squinted up at me in uncomprehending fear. My arm trembled upwards with the laser, Suit straining against my muscles as I tried to point it away. "Suit!" I screamed. Then I bashed my free hand against my face, hard enough that my nose crackled. Not Suit's doing, but mine: if I was a danger to myself I'd distract him from killing Detbar. I needed time, to convince Suit of the importance of keeping the remaining traces of the Godball alive, and to figure out some way to purge the Assassin.

It worked, at least for a moment. Suit stopped. I got in another good blow to my own face, and felt blood roll out of my nose, then Suit threw up a helmet. So I exhaled everything in my lungs and held my breath. Not exactly a suicide attempt, but it would alarm Suit, who was always keeping track of my vital functions.

The part of Suit that was working for the Assassin slackened just enough that the part that was still mine asserted itself, and lowered the gun. I had something to work with. I hauled us clumsily back out into the corridor, leaving Detbar to cower alone.

"Listen," I said. Suit dropped a speaker into my ear and a subvoc mike down my throat and we talked.

Suit and I, we hadn't been at odds very often before. When we were, it didn't last long. We worked it out. We had to. We were married, you know. Compromise is the essence of conjugal tranquillity. That's what they told us in Suit school, anyway.

Suit made it very clear that he'd taken on the Assassin's priorities: he had to kill these men. Besides, it would please him to kill them. He'd been disappointed when a fight didn't materialize. What's more, he and the Assassin got along, on a fundamental level; they shared a distrust of this sloppy, vulnerable dream-stuff.

Who was I to stand in the way? It was a fair question.

For my part I let him know what I felt was important. It was pretty simple, once our cards were on the table. We struck a simple deal. Suit could kill them. But not before I got to fuck Yp.

Actually, I kept one card in my sleeve. Just a hunch, but if the Godball were intent on saving itself, I might

# Castalia

## Don Webb

There's a park near Smithville, Texas – a park of fourteen hundred acres – bordered by the University of Texas/M.D. Anderson Research Park on the north. I've often wondered what they research there behind their high chain-link fence in the middle of thousands of acres of piney woods. In the park only a few yards from Park Road 1C is a sulphur spring with the green and white park sign, "Water Not Suitable for Drinking" with the logo of a silver-grey faucet encircled by a red circle and bar. Across the sign someone had pocketknife-cut "Castalia."

My wife Sarah and I were on one of our Monday picnics. We schedule our work weeks for Tuesday through Saturday – one of the advantages in working for a large multinational: since they work in all time, you can often work in any. Mondays are great for picnics. The parks often exist for you alone. She was driving our green Ford Taurus and I suggested we pull off at Picnic Site No. 2.

She turned the car down into the pebbled road between the live oaks and pines. I could see the silvery water. I thought this would be a good spot haunted by cool moist breezes. It was over a hundred degrees, but with shade and breeze it could be pleasant. We stepped from our car's AC into the fetid sulphur smell. We knew about sulphur springs, mud volcanoes, and sour water. There are scores of places in East and Central Texas that look back to the lush rolling years of the Jurassic. We laughed at our bad luck and laid our seedless grapes, sparkling water and Pepperidge Farm cookies on the wooden table. We decided to go look at the spring.

At some time there had been a road right up to the spring. The park service had half-buried cypress logs to keep wheeled vehicles out. The spring bubbled out of an ancient feature of Texas geology, the Llano Upl thrust. The soil and rocks were all variety of iron – black magnetite, yellow limotite, red hematite, and the purplish-pink stone known as Llanoite. Everything was brown and yellow and red. Except for the spring. It pushed eight or nine inches into the air, bubbling white with the pressure of the Earth. Its foul-smelling water sparkled over long streamers of green and white algae. The algae grew like mermaid's hair from the rocks. I had never seen anything so intensely green... but it wasn't the green of plant life. There was something *other* about it. The

white strands were purely white. A glance at Sarah told me she had never seen its like. I felt the first adulterous urge I had ever felt in seven years of marriage. I wanted this spring – or at least the other-ance of the spring – for myself.

I said, "That green and white moss is common to sulphur springs throughout Central Texas." I had lied so she wouldn't know what a marvel this was. The spring was mine now. She would never think of it – save for a vague memory of the green. She would accept my lie, of course. I am a geologist for the world's largest oil company. Wells are sunk at my word.

"Let's go back and eat," said Sarah. "I'm going to wash up first."

She stepped toward the spring. Then she saw the "Not Suitable for Drinking" sign. It was hard to believe anything as bubbly light-filled as the spring could be poisonous. She read the sign.

She said, "I think there's a restroom by the next picnic site. Coming?"

I nodded no. I went to the picnic table and sat facing the spring. Sarah is 101-percent urban. She crashed her way toward the brown stone latrine. She couldn't miss a dried stick or crackling leaf. The door banged behind her. I contemplated getting a sample of the spring water, but if I had it analysed and it was different – then the place would swarm with chemists, scientists, and government. If it weren't different, then I'd lose something rare.

A shadow shifted in the forest. The shadow became a woman in a tattered dress grey as shadow. Her hair was grey, but she seemed young and vital. She did not see me. Only the spring. When she was close enough, she bent down to drink deeply. She looked up, looked directly at me, nodded and fled back into the forest.

I had seen a madwoman drink a no doubt fatal dose of poisonous water. How was I to explain this to Sarah or to the park guards? How could I explain my silence, my complicity in her act?

And her eyes were as green as the strange water growth.

Auburn-haired Sarah crashed back to our table. I told her I couldn't stand the sulphur smell any longer, and would it be OK if we found another table.

We moved on and crunched our cookies by the scum-covered lake. After the picnic was the usual searching in local thrift shops. We hoped that we